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That free parking is costing us a lot

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Rock-star parking!

Few things excite urban drivers more than scoring a spot to park right in front of their destination, especially when the alternative is paying at a private lot or driving in circles to find a precious free space.

But free parking spaces, even those fit for a rock star, are overrated by their seekers and their providers, according to urban planner Donald Shoup of the University of California at Los Angeles.

While 99 percent of U.S. automobile trips end at a "free" parking space, the average parking space costs more than the average car, according to Shoup. Developers, tenants, customers and taxpayers foot the largely unseen bill to turn valuable real estate and street space into parking.

Shoup lecture at UW March 2

Donald Shoup will speak on his book, "The High Cost of Free Parking" (American Planning Association, 2005), on Thursday, March 2, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the University of Washington's Architecture Hall, Room 147. The event is free, but parking on the UW campus is not.

Shoup estimates the nation spends about as much providing off-street parking each year as the federal government spends on national defense or Medicare.

"In southern California, about a third of the cost of any new building is the parking," he says.

Planners and drivers often believe that parking is in short supply, even though it is the largest land-use in most cities. In Seattle's central business district, the average occupancy of on-street parking during peak hours is about 60 percent, according to Shoup.

He says an oversupply can feel like a shortage because governments usually offer their land to parked cars at no charge, preventing market forces from rectifying any imbalance.

"How can it be that housing is expensive for people but free for cars?" he asks. "The land is so valuable that giving it away free just doesn't make sense."

Shoup calls for cities to start charging performance-based prices for curb parking. Fees would vary throughout the day to yield about an 85 percent occupancy rate. At that rate, most spaces are being used, but a couple of spaces on each block should always be available, reducing the hunt for parking, which wastes fuel and clogs streets.

"Implementing Donald Shoup's ideas right away would not be painless," says Mark Troxel with Seattle's Department of Planning and Development, "both in terms of political will and inconvenience."

"We dislike parking facilities until we need one, at which time we want it to be abundant, convenient and free," writes Todd Litman of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute in his new book, "Parking Management Best Practices." Litman and Shoup agree that even small reductions in parking can improve housing affordability, transportation and the environment.

When informed of complaints about the parking "pay stations" that are replacing parking meters in Seattle, Shoup is unsympathetic.

"We're so spoiled," he says, "we want to park for free, and we don't want to walk five car lengths to pay."

"That whining you hear is the sound of change," he says.

To keep fans of rock-star parking from revolting, Shoup proposes that all revenue from parking be used to improve the neighborhoods where it is collected.

In Pasadena, Calif., parking fees have been used to remove graffiti, build sidewalks and install street furniture, helping to revitalize a run-down historic district. Merchants who initially opposed charging for street parking now call for expanding it, according to Shoup.

"Now they see parking meter violations like shoplifting," he says. "Why should somebody park free when there's somebody else who's willing to pay for it?"

Shoup praises Seattle for having no minimum parking requirements for downtown developments, and proposes that cities turn their parking minimums into parking maximums.

"You shouldn't force developers to provide parking they don't want to provide," he argues. "It should be a commercial decision, it shouldn't be bundled into the price of housing or anything else."

The city of Seattle is looking to reduce the amount of parking built in much of the city. It has lowered parking requirements for multifamily housing to a half-space per housing unit in dense neighborhoods like First Hill and Pike-Pine, where car ownership rates are low. The city is proposing to eliminate parking requirements in urban centers and near light-rail stations, and may reduce parking requirements in other neighborhoods.

Even without requiring it, parking gets built, Troxel says. He says most new condos in Belltown have about one parking space per unit.

City Councilman Peter Steinbrueck has proposed limiting above-ground parking to two stories per building downtown.

The city council will take up parking reforms on April 12.

"Cities that restrict parking have downtowns that people like," Shoup argues. "Cities that require parking — like Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, Buffalo — nobody wants to visit."

Downtown Los Angeles has more parking per square mile than any place on earth, according to Shoup.

He singles out the University of Washington, where he will speak next week, for its successful transportation and parking policies.

"UW has fewer than half the parking spaces of UCLA, (though) it's just about equivalent in every other regard," he says.

"There aren't parking structures and parking lots taking up the land. It's a very well-designed campus."

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